



Van Peebles

Melvin Van Peebles has always been a maverick. He has gone against the grain in the past creating fresh approaches to both film and stage. He is back with a new play on Broadway "Waltz of the Stork" which is also unconventional in its structure. However, Melvin is a man who plays by his own rules. In the following interview he tells us why.

**NS:** One writer has said that your play, "Waltz of the Stork" has been eviscerated by the critics. However, I saw the play, liked it and gave you a generally favorable review. I also noticed that although the audience was small, and primarily Black, everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. But, small audiences don't keep shows alive. Do you think that the power of the critics is that awesome to keep people away from the show in spite of its merits?

**VAN PEEBLES:** Well, there is a lot that you are not saying. You are saying, **THE CRITICS.** The critics you are talking about were white; yourself and myself are Black. The audience is Black. Black audiences loved it. The critics don't bother me at all. All I need is the time for the Black audiences to see it, and they dig it. They have a good time, and that's the way I play it. It's all a question of if you can last economically. However, the show is not in an immense house because I wasn't born with the last rain and I did not expect the White critics to be crying. Why should I? Sweetback—they hated it. Ain't Supposed to Die—they hated it. Everything else I ever did—they hated it. And they all went on finally to become huge critical and financial successes. At that time, everybody forgot that they hated it originally and were telling me what a genius I was.

## INTERVIEW WITH: MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

BY CLAUDE REED, JR.

The word of mouth on this show in the Black community is excellent. That's all I need. One of the things I enjoy about those things is that the Black public then becomes aware that it is not helpless. That it can be the captain of its own ship. I was born and bred in the briar patch so I don't understand why we should look forward to favorable reviews from the people who, in every other walk of life, their message is negative. Why should we think this play should be any different?

**NS:** In my opinion, Broadway does not seem to be very interested in "Black Shows" unless we are singing and dancing. I feel that "Waltz of the Stork" is not the typical Black Show, because its content encompasses elements experienced by all people. But in spite of this, do you feel the play has been typecast as just another Black Show in which there is not enough minstrel-type activity?

**VAN PEEBLES:** One of the political things I believe is that this show is like old time radio. You look at it and I like people to think. After your initial shock of not thinking, (or being asked to think) you can start to go with it. But learning to think can also be a dangerous political activity. So, they prefer us to be spoon fed. First, the show is universal, but in a racist society if the narrator happens to be Black, white critics can't get over that fact. It then becomes Black to them. That problem also lies a little deeper. You see Blacks are now—feeling very, very big-hearted. They let a few Blacks be quarterback. But I'm not the quarterback, I own the franchise.

**NS:** You're the puppeteer as opposed to the puppet.

**VAN PEEBLES:** That's right. The buck always stops here. I make the decisions how to run the show. And nobody's ready for that. And next because the show uses a different style. It uses what we call a minimalist style where economy of theatre is important. White folks haven't even gotten around to inventing that yet. So they can only assume that I'm trying to copy them somewhere. The critics can't believe that I could have the abstract power to have it styled differently. So they're reviewing this from some viewpoint that I must be trying to copy—the same complaint that I get from each of the styles that I set. "Sweetback" set a whole style of movie making, so did "Ain't Supposed to Die A Natural Death" in theater. Now here is the dif-

ference: Each time that the original thrust was made the critics said "wait a minute, he must be making a mistake. He is copying us badly."

**NS:** So they are looking for forms to compare you with, and you're coming up with unique forms for which there is no comparison?

**VAN PEEBLES:** I couldn't be coming up with a unique form. I had to be making a mistake, because we don't have that power of abstraction. So the reviewers decided that's where I was. Also, we are monolithic—even in our creativity. Dustin Hoffman can play one role, another role and a different role and nobody finds that surprising. But we don't have the flexibility in the eyes of the critics to be anything but the role you play. However, back home at the ranch brothers and sisters can see the film and say, "Hey I know that cat". The character. Any they just go along with the Character.

**NS:** You have been spending your own money in recent weeks to keep your show alive. You did the same thing 10 years ago with "Ain't Supposed to Die A Natural Death" and "Don't Play Us Cheap." Subsequently, those two plays garnered 11 Tony Nominations. Obviously, you expect "Waltz of the Stork" to catch on as well. What situations do you find similar in this effort with "Stork" and what are the differences today as opposed to 10 years ago?

**VAN PEEBLES:** Well, it's still the same situation. I've been through the forest so I know where the trails are. Only nobody would come in with me. It's very funny that life takes such an ironic flip-flop. For example, I'm somewhat of a hermit. I don't believe in going out. Usually, when I go out people say "You're an ego maniac". "You want to do everything". Wait a minute brother. I have asked people to go in with me in each and every situation. Would you please come in with me? NO! Then when it's a success—Well, see you would not come in with me to do it. For example, I did buy the investors out on this show. But David Merrick did the same thing. Nobody said anything. When he did "42nd Street", he got bad reviews out of town, and his investors were grumbling. He said, OK and just bought everybody out. You didn't hear nothing from nobody. I'm cool. I bet on it. Look, it's either this or go to Atlantic

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City. I might as well put my bread on what I think can help us. I think it is very important that we have images about ourselves to look at. There are Black children on Broadway and there are Black actors in shows that are supposed to be Black. And it's very interesting how they solve the problem of Blackness because in America—the attractive America—our situation is a nightmare. They do reviews with no story content so you are not faced with the problems of story content.

NS: They get into the technicalities, the lighting and such and who sang the best and that type of thing.

VAN PEEBLES: Right, but they don't deal with our position in the superstructure of the American nightmare. I deal with that. I deal with that well enough, I think, where the story has its strength and also with its comedic moments, its warmth and its tenderness. And with the audience. I talk to the audience and we get it on. Shakespeare used the sides. Why can't I use the sides?

NS: I heard you changed some things around in the play since I saw it.

VAN PEEBLES: It's more than just the play, it has become a political event. The process of us rallying around something enjoyable. By rallying around, pulling together, bus loads are coming and networks are growing of understanding between black folk and also a cohesiveness that can be reused for other occasions and other things. That's what's important. I formed a company with my ex-secretary. We formed a company to do nothing but group sales. People call in from all over the country for group sales. This is one of the reasons Black shows were having such a hard time—they did not have block ticket sellers which holds many shows up. Or you can even get a discount. Well, we weren't hip to those various things. The first show we took on was "The Wiz." "The Wiz" had its closing notices posted the night it opened. Through our efforts and other efforts, the show became a success. That is why this company is called "Wiz Group Sales" to this day. Because that was the first show we took. Wiz Group Sales is out there pushing and making tickets available so that the Lena Horne shows and the shows for Woody King for Douglas Turner Ward, and white shows also can be seen by the people. By people learning that they can work together like that, has been very helpful.

NS: I understand it also helps theater to be a little more affordable for Black folks, because with the price of tickets nowadays, there are not a lot of people who can come down and drop \$35. to \$40 for tickets.

ample, "Stork" has got the cheapest orchestra seats on Broadway?

NS: At what price?

VAN PEEBLES: Well, the orchestra seats during the week are \$22.50. Now, I don't have a problem there. Every seat is an orchestra seat. Everybody sitting in that last row can spit in my face. That's what I wanted to do, get also to the point where we don't have to take back seats to anything. I don't take a salary. It's more important politically.

NS: If you could put it into one sentence, what would you say that "Waltz of the Stork" is all about?

VAN PEEBLES: I think it is probably—it's a voyage from folly to wisdom. It's about growing up, becoming wiser.

NS: Being a man who never took a professional acting course in your life, how did you put yourself in a position to make your directorial debut with Godfrey Cambridge in "Watermelon man"?

VAN PEEBLES: I'd done other shows before that. "Story of a Three Day Pass" was my first feature. I had already done some short films before I did that. So it wasn't my debut at all. As a matter of fact, that started a whole Black directorial movement because a Black hadn't made a feature film since 1932. There were some films about the poor Black plight, but nobody felt enough about the poor Black plight to let Black writers and Black directors do their own plight. When I came back to America, as one of the French Delegates in the San Francisco Film Festival, I was a French director. I made my first feature in French. Nobody knew that I was an American, let alone Black. That caused such a furor and embarrassment that the search was on for the great Black hope. Because the attitude in America at that time said "As soon as Blacks could learn to handle that complicated equipment and blah, blah blah, and perhaps, maybe one day, they could—so and so." I had a job offered me thereafter but if I had taken that job offer, I felt that I would have become the one person to get through and no one else would get a shot. I didn't have a job, but I didn't take the directorial job. Subsequently, two Black directors were found. These eminently qualified people, Ossie Davis and Gordon Parks, made their directorial debuts on the embarrassment and the furor that came with a Black "French director" having been named to the Film Festival. After that, I made "Watermelon Man."

NS: Last fall your adaptation of John Williams' novel "Sophisticated Gents" was aired on NBC to critical acclaim. How did you get involved in this project?

VAN PEEBLES: Someone called me

read a book with the eventual eye of working on it. I wasn't very interested and when he told me it was John Williams book, I read it and I couldn't put the thing down. I said "Yes, I would be very interested." Then I asked the next question, "What's the bread?" "How much do I get?" I was told, "Well, I don't know the answer to that yet, because I don't know which network is going to take it." I said, "Well, you mean you don't have a deal?" He says, "Well no, I don't have a deal yet." I said, "Well, what do you want me to do." He said, "I would like you to read it, and make a presentation." I said, "Wait a minute. If I make a presentation for you and you and I go to the network together, I am doing half of your work. If we get the deal, what do I get out of it?" He said, "You get to write it." I said, "Well hell, I get to write it anyhow, cause you come to me cause I'm the best." He said, "Well, OK, what do you want?" I said, "I'm helping you produce it. I want associate producer, one of the title tunes, and I named a bunch of other conditions, plus write it." He said, "Bet". I said, "You got it." When it came through, Manny Wilson was as good as his word. That's what we did and that's how the show came about.

NS: You have always exemplified a great determination to make your dreams a reality. In the age of Reaganomics, which is resulting in increased disillusionment among our young people, what advice do you offer them?

VAN PEEBLES: First, there is a hitch in that. I think they should not have been disillusioned in the first place. I don't think that is a relatively new phenomenon—Reaganomics. It's just care. He's taking less care to hide where he is coming from. I don't really see the situation any less differently than it's ever been. I don't deal with the details of racism anymore now than I did before. It's there, and exists—OK. You just know a little more where you are. That's why I tell people sometimes where they stand in the superstructure of the American nightmare—now it's very clear. That's how I feel about it.

NS: What are some of your future projects?

VAN PEEBLES: Well, I've got a large musical that I am putting together now, based on Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" called "Becky". I didn't write the music to it, I wrote the book for it, and I co-authored the lyrics. That is one of my projects. Of course, I've written "Sweetback Part II", and there are a couple of other things I've got in mind but I don't dare say because their husbands might read the article. That's about the size of it.

NS: Thanks Melvin.